Mr. Average American: confirmed suburbanite

By Martin Yant

The average American is a confirmed suburbanite.

That conclusion doesn't come from any national survey, however. It's the view of Mr. Average American himself, Richard Johnson of north suburban Rolling Meadows, whom computers selected in 1972 as the representative of the typical middle-class American.

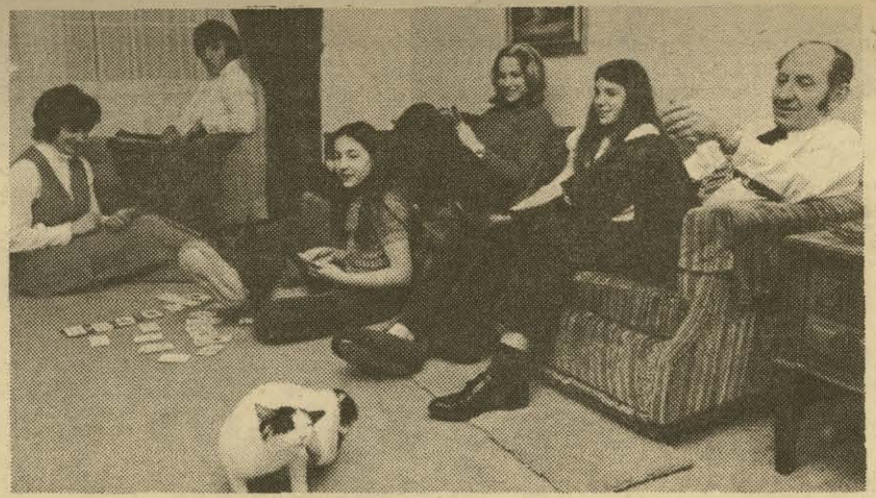
Johnson, 45, that year starred in two public-television shows. One was on the average American coping with spiraling inflation. The other was an inside look at a presidential campaign through Johnson's eyes.

The fact that Johnson was chosen as the typical American is a reflection of the growing importance of the suburbs in American society. His background also indicates their growing independence from the city. He was born and raised in the suburbs, works there and spends most of his leisure time there.

The father of four leaves his handsome bilevel home early each morning for his job as credit manager for the National Steel Service Center in Evanston. He has made the 21-mile one-way trip by car pool for the past 12 years. It takes a little over an hour each way.

Johnson says he doesn't mind the drive, because, like the majority of suburbanites polled by Suburban Week, he enjoys the community in which he lives.

"I'm very proud of this little town," he says. "The tax burden is as fair as possible and I don't know of any suburb that could give me as much for my money. I don't think I'll ever move out, unless I should happen to move South when I retire, or something like that."



Mr. and Mrs. Richard Johnson and their children, from left, Ricky, 18; Nancy, 12; Laurie, 16, and Jean, 13, relax at home with their cat.

Like most suburbanites, Johnson says he does most of his nongrocery shopping in a regional shopping center. He reports moderate community involvement, mostly in church and sports activities, and spends most of his leisure time in his own town. And most of that is with his family.

"We do a lot of family-type things and occasionally take in a movie, but that's about it," he says.

Not surprisingly, Johnson rates the general living conditions of his community as excellent. He says transportation is Rolling Meadows' most pressing problem, and would support a move to get good public transportation for the area.

Though many aspects of suburban life appeal to him, Johnson says his main reason for locating in Rolling Meadows 17 years ago was undoubtedly housing.

"Cost was the big factor," he says. "I looked around in places like Evanston (where he was born and raised) and Skokie, but this was the best place I could afford for the type of house I wanted."

Though a native suburbanite, Johnson maintains a reasonable amount of contact with Chicago. He says he visits the city on the average of once a month for pleasure, usually to dine at one of its restaurants.

He says nothing such as crime or congestion keeps him from going more often. He just has no need to.

How much concern does he have for Chicago's problems? Slight.

"I of course try to help whenever I can, but we have lots of problems of our own, too. And that concerns me more," he says.

Like the majority of those polled, Johnson says he would not oppose racial integration in his neighborhood if those involved were of the same economic background. Neither would he consider living in the city, even if his income were such that he could select any lifestyle he wished.

That could be because he already *has* the lifestyle he wants.

Johnson, whose wife Mary Ann works as a secretary at their Lutheran church to help keep the family financially afloat, says the fact that most families in Rolling Meadows are pretty much in the same boat is what makes it such a nice place to live.

"Everybody is basically on the same economic level out here," he says. "Everybody is really struggling to make ends meet, and that's part of the glory of the thing."